

now & after

FEBRUARY, 1977

A LIBERTARIAN SOCIALIST NEWSLETTER

ISSUE NO. 1



on the unions

One of the most difficult questions facing radicals is what attitude to take toward the trade unions. Generally speaking, the left has regarded trade unionism as progressive activity which, given proper objective conditions, leads to revolutionary activity.

What traditional leftists have been unable to understand is that unions, far from challenging the wage system, are, and always have been, defensive organs seeking to obtain the best return for the labor power of the workers in the framework of the capitalist market. As one observer put it: "The labor leader organizes and sells wage workers to the highest bidder on the best terms available. He is a jobber of labor power. He accepts the general conditions of labor under capitalism and then, as a contracting agent operating within the system, he haggles and bargains over wages, hours, and working conditions for the members of his union."¹ In this sense, as suppliers of labor power, the unions are an integral component of the system, or, as "labor statesman" David Dubinsky phrased it: "Trade unionism needs capitalism like a fish needs water."²

The organizational form itself is ill-suited to militant struggle. Partly out of economic insecurity, partly out of adaptation to the dominant values of capitalist society, the working class traditionally tended to organize itself as a pressure group, complete with a corps of professional leaders to whom it delegated power. Both unions and left-wing parties have followed this hierarchical pattern of organization. Although they have sometimes brought the workers modest improvements, this has been at the cost of depriving the rank and file of direct control over their own struggles.

Part of the confusion about the role of unionism undoubtedly results from a failure to

recognize that ruling class attitudes have changed. Until comparatively recent times the capitalists firmly opposed unionization. In a competitive capitalist system, a union contract might place an individual firm at a competitive disadvantage and was opposed accordingly. As the economy tended to become monopolized, the capitalists were able to control the market more effectively through price fixing and other such measures. In this situation, trade unionism didn't seem as subversive to the bosses, since they would be able to nullify its costs by raising prices and increasing productivity.

In addition, the advantages of unions as stabilizers of the system gradually became apparent, namely: (1) Trade unions were a means of diverting the workers' discontent into harmless channels or, in other words, for converting the class struggle into interest group activity; (2) Unions were a means of regulating the purchasing power of the workers, which would help to lessen the inherent tendency of capitalism toward overproduction; and (3) They provided a special stratum, the labor bureaucracy, for enforcing contractual periods of labor peace.

The attitude toward unions upheld by most of the American left today was formed well before 1935, when the passage of the Wagner Act signaled a shift in approach by a decisive section of the ruling class (spurred on by the massive working class revolt of the early '30s). "Revolutionary industrial unionism" was a slogan raised not only by the IWW and other syndicalists, who regarded the union as the revolutionary organization *per se*, but by the revolutionary socialists as well. The latter attempted to capture existing unions or establish new "revolutionary" ones in unorganized industries. When confronted with the conservatism and class collaboration of the American Federation of Labor,

ABOUT OURSELVES . . .

About a year ago a call was issued for the formation of a "libertarian socialist federation" in the Bay Area. This appeal elicited great interest; almost 100 people attended one of the conferences held. Nevertheless, after the initial euphoria, it became clear that since the discussions were not progressing interest was waning. Last spring the public meetings were discontinued because the few remaining participants found it impossible to reach an agreement. In retrospect, it may appear that the attempt to unify people of very different backgrounds (anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists, situationists, ultra-left Marxists) was a noble but premature ambition. However, if the meetings failed to attain their initial objective, the balance-sheet was far from negative: ideas were exchanged, contacts were strengthened between people of similar trends of thought. In addition, our group emerged from the discussion.

Our pamphlet, "A World to Win," was printed and distributed in May, 1976. Its sales in local bookstores have been satisfactory. Many copies were sent to individuals and friendly groups in this country and abroad. There is a modest but constant demand for the pamphlet, which will soon be out of print.

Our text was well distributed, but response from our readers, while encouraging, was only moderate. Comrades from our general perspective in Europe sent greetings and encouragements with friendly criticism (or promise of it). We received many letters containing questions or expressing disagreements. We are carrying on dialogues with these correspondents. Also, in this newsletter we are publishing excerpts from some of these letters.

We would like to thank those who helped on that project: the typesetter, the artist, the friends who bought bundles of copies, the publishers of *Synthesis* and *Echanges* who reviewed the pamphlet, and the comrade from Spark Books who reprinted and distributed it.

Our subsequent discussions have aimed at correcting the inadequacies of "A World to Win." We are aware of the vagueness of some statements and of the scant treatment of some questions. This reflects in part the situation of the revolutionary movement now, in particular the doubts, scruples and questions which confront people like us, who don't claim to be infallible prophets. The shortcomings may also be attributed to the origin and composition of the group and to our desire to quickly publish a document upon which we could work together and move forward.

Among comrades in general sympathy with our orientation the absence of a clear-cut perspective on political economy was regretted. Others wanted a more definite position on the trade union question.*

With regard to economics, we don't feel capable, for the time being at least, of producing an original and serious work on the subject. It would have been easy to concoct one of those pretentious and empty texts which encumber so many radical papers: two or three quotations, a few statistics, a ritual invocation of the perennially falling rate of profit and the irreconcilable contradictions of capitalism, culminating in a few predictions sufficiently vague in time and space as to defy verification. We will spare the reader the tedium of this type of article. Of course, we do not live in limbo and are very much interested in the economic aspects of the society in which we live. But as it follows from our pamphlet and from the writings of fraternal comrades, our opposition to private and state capitalist societies is not based on their inability, real or alleged, to overcome various economic problems. Although unemployment affects us very much as wage-earners, we have not—contrary to some radical groups—heralded a revolutionary upsurge because of the increase in unemployment or fluctuations in the rate of inflation. This being said, it goes without saying that we have no contempt for economics, and will publish studies or information on the subject when possible.

We spent many hours discussing the union question, dealing with historical examples as well as with personal experiences. Although there was little disagreement on the text we are publishing here, some comrades tend more than others to stress what they consider the limited but positive aspect of trade unionism. The text adopted expands on the general ideas contained in "A World to Win" and is not an attempt to be the last word on the subject.

We have been asked our opinion about holding a national libertarian conference as a preliminary step toward the foundation of a national organization. We can all deplore the pre-

*A very minor point: some people, either through ignorance or through a sentimental clinging to the concept of the "anti-imperialist united front," were offended at our calling Ho-Chi-minh a butcher. The facts (if not the details) of Ho's thuggery have been well known for years, even if the left in general has not been eager to disseminate this information. Even the Trotskyists, who bore the brunt of Ho's repression, have, in their abject fawning on Stalinism, soft-pedaled this episode. Those wishing to read more on this subject are referred to *Vietnam: Whose Victory?* by Bob Potter, published by SOLIDARITY.

sent situation in which many small, isolated groups spend much time and energy for meager results; however, a sober look at the problem reveals that this situation cannot be corrected artificially, through administrative measures. With perhaps a few exceptions, the isolation of these groups reflects not only geographical dispersal but also real divergences. Most of these differences are not insurmountable if people are willing to shed their traditional jargon and prejudices to deal with real issues. But as long as we are only engaging in discussions and are not involved in common practice, this process of unification is slow and thankless work, as we learned in the Bay Area. Although it must be done, we are not ready at present to participate in a hasty regroupment that could at best represent a paper unification. We are in general agreement with the ideas put forth by Paul Mattick, Jr. in *Synthesis* No. 3.

The frequency of publication of this newsletter will be determined by several factors, the most important of which is the response from our readers. Although we can always use contributions, we need your comments and suggestions more. Exchange of ideas and information is vital for those who want a radical transformation of society. We hope that *Now & After* will be a means to that end. □

—Feb., 1977

Continued from Page 1

they countered with proposals for structural changes (industrial unionism substituted for craft unionism) and for the replacement of incumbent bureaucrats with new leaders espousing a more radical line. The Communist Party continued this tradition of reliance on trade union work, now "boring from within," now forming "dual unions," according to the dictates of Soviet foreign policy. So successful were they in their union work that they eventually gained control of a sizable segment of the newly formed CIO in the late '30s. As labor bureaucrats these "revolutionaries" acted in so similar a fashion to the common garden variety picard that when the CIO decided to expel the Communist-controlled unions, they were forced to base their case upon an examination of union convention resolutions on foreign policy matters.

The point is that the essence of unionism—periodic bargaining which contains the class struggle within a narrow institutional framework—imposes itself on the best-intentioned radicals. Either they go the way of all flesh or

they remain isolated cranks uttering ritual denunciations of the "sell-out" bureaucrats. The reality is that the union bureaucracy has developed into a kind of mediating force between workers and management, pursuing interests of its own. Its power rests mainly on its ability to convince both classes that it alone can protect each one from the other. In recent years this "balancing act" has in fact meant a growing alliance with employers and government against the workers.³ In view of the foregoing, the persistent attempts by various Leninists to "conquer" the unions can perhaps be explained by the bureaucratic nature of their own organizations, which expect to run society "on behalf of" the workers.⁴

Central to any fundamental social change, as we see it, is the self-activity of people—the struggles they wage on their own behalf. For this reason, it is important in evaluating the unions to pay attention to current attitudes of workers toward them.

Over the past two decades American workers have demonstrated an increasing hostility to unions.⁵ This tendency has been manifested by wildcat strikes and rank and file rejections of proposed contracts. Workers have also become less enthusiastic about the kind of union reform movements that they previously supported, probably because the reformers elected have not differed significantly from the people they replaced.

While they seldom see the unions as the product or expression of their own struggle, workers still tend to support them for providing a kind of elementary protection against the employers. This point has a particular significance for workers in backward industries, people with experience in non-union shops, and those old enough to remember the pre-union days.

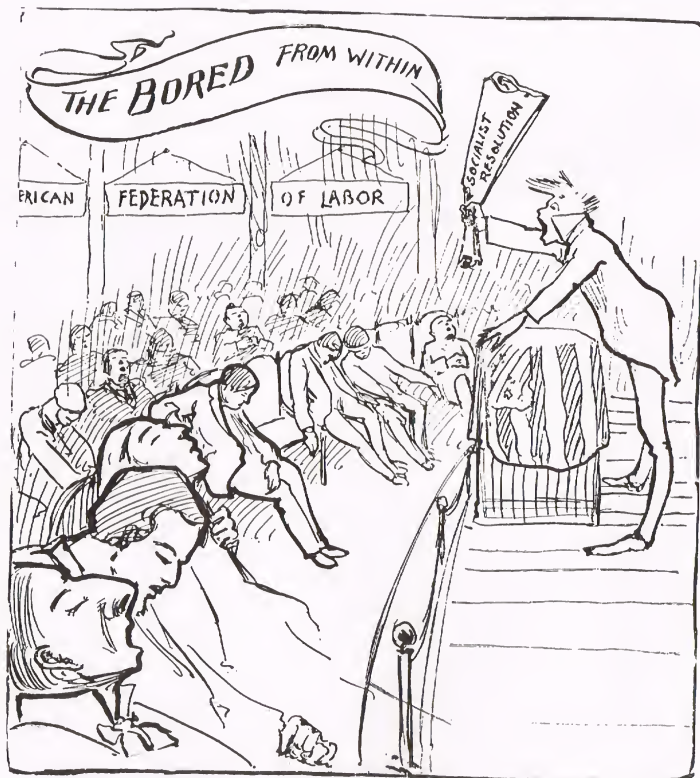
What, then, is the alternative? We have already suggested that because of their top-down structure, their spirit of negotiated compromise, their developing collaboration with bosses and government, and their unavoidable role as brokers of labor power, the unions cannot be converted into effective instruments of struggle, much less of social revolution. We have rejected the traditional left's strategy of reforming or capturing the unions as being both unrealistic and bureaucratic. We also believe that when the self-activity of the workers reaches a high point (i.e. a revolution), the unions will be swept aside along with all other institutions tied to the old order.

But both the history of anarcho-syndicalism and the experience of recent wildcat struggles make it seem unlikely that workers could estab-

lish within capitalism alternative rank and file organizations on a permanent basis. Due to the nature of unionism, the anarcho-syndicalists⁶ found it impossible to be revolutionary and "trade unionist" at the same time. As for the rank and file assemblies and struggle committees

be waged more and more through temporary *ad hoc* organizations.

It is in this light that we should criticize the view stated, or at least hinted at, by certain "ultra-left" groups that revolutionaries should call on workers to quit (or destroy) the unions.⁷



The People, 1900

that have sprung up recently (notably in Italy), they usually either dissolve when the particular fight ends, or else they are progressively incorporated into the union structure. This implies that in "normal" capitalist times, struggles will

(Let's leave aside the question whether it is the business of revolutionaries to issue such "directives.") This proposal suggests one of two things:

(1) Workers can and should form alternative

bodies that would defend their day-to-day interests better than the unions do.⁸ The examples cited above, as well as the experience of the German councilists after World War I, make us doubt that these bodies can survive as much more than propaganda groups, except in the context of an ascending movement.⁹

(2) Workers should "start the revolution" immediately.¹⁰ To this we respond that the workers will "start the revolution" and go beyond unionism when they are willing and able. While recognizing the connection between day-to-day struggles and revolution, we suspect that abandoning the unions becomes a practical issue only in periods of intense and widespread confrontation.

Whether we like it or not, as long as people see little chance of a major upsurge, as long as they doubt their ability to take matters into their own hands, they will continue to rely in a limited way on the unions. In acknowledging this we don't mean to make a virtue out of it. Our basic conviction is that only the autonomous activity of people can bring about a radical transformation of society—not merely because the capitalists and "leftist" politicians can't do it for them, but also because it is through this activity that they will be transformed into new people capable of building a new society. We believe that the unions, far from aiding this development, are increasingly an obstacle to it. This is why we would not hesitate to encourage people to struggle outside or even against them. In fact such struggles are already occurring; we intend to take part in them. □

NOTES

1. Mills, C. Wright. *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948. p. 6.
2. Quoted in ILGWU: *Fighting for Lower Wages*. Boston: New England Free Press, n.d.
3. Well documented by John Zerzan in *Organized Labor versus "The Revolt Against Work."* Available in *Unions Against Revolution* from Black & Red, P.O. Box 9546, Detroit, Mich. 48202.
4. This mentality is displayed in every issue of *Workers Vanguard* and *Workers Power*.
5. See Brecher, Jeremy & Costell, Tim. *Common Sense for Hard Times*. New York: Two Continents Publishing Group, Institute for Policy Studies, 1976.
6. The example of the Spanish CNT may seem to contradict this assertion. Its relative radicalism, however, can, at least in part, be attributed to the near impossibility of reformism in the Spain of the '20s and '30s. Even so, reformist currents emerged in the CNT from time to time. And when push came to shove in 1936-37, its "influential militants" supported and finally joined a capitalist government.

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<i>As we don't see it</i>55
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<i>Vietnam: Whose Victory?</i> (by Bob Potter)	1.05
<i>Theses on the Chinese Revolution</i> (by Cajo Brendel)	1.05
<i>Modern Capitalism and Revolution</i> (by Paul Cardan)	1.75
<i>The Meaning of Socialism</i> (Cardan)55
<i>From Bolshevism to the Bureaucracy</i> (Cardan)55
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A WORLD TO WIN

P.O. Box 1587

San Francisco, CA 94101

People outside of North America who want SOLIDARITY literature can obtain it faster and at lower cost from SOLIDARITY in London (address in our international directory).

7. See Zerzan's comments near the end of *Trade Unionism or Socialism*, published by Solidarity (London), c/o 123 Latham Road, London E.6, England.

8. This seems to be the position of G. Munis in *Unions Against Revolution*, the Black & Red pamphlet cited above.

9. The AAUD, a network of workplace committees, was formed in Germany in 1920. Influenced by the IWW and the British shop stewards movement, it rejected parliamentarism and trade unionism, regarding itself as the embryo of the council system that would run communist society. As the post-war revolutionary wave subsided, the AAUD dwindled in size and influence to a small radical sect. It finally abandoned any claims to unite all the workers, joining with an earlier split-off to form an explicit propaganda group, the KAUD.

10. This idea comes across in issue no. 1 of *Forward*, P.O. Box 60161, 1723 W. Devon, Chicago, Ill. 60660. This paper rejects all struggles that are not for "communism."

INTERNATIONAL DIRECTORY

EXCHANGES: Published in France, this excellent bulletin is a "way of exchanging information on struggles and of exchanging discussions, criticisms and news of publications based essentially on the New Movement, i.e., that whole group of struggles of every sort carried out by those directly concerned themselves for their own emancipation."

Subscription: minimum of 10 francs (or \$2) for period determined by the cost of each bulletin. Specify whether you want the French or English version. Correspondence and payments can be sent to any of the following:

France: Echanges et Mouvement, B.P. 242, 75866 Paris Cedex 18.

Great Britain: Joe Jacobs, 29 Troutbeck, Albany Street, London N.W. 1.

Holland: Daad en Gedachte, Schouw 48-11, Leylstaad.

Besides translating some **SOLIDARITY** pamphlets into French and reprinting previously unavailable council communist writings, the group has published several interesting pamphlets on recent workers' struggles in France, Poland, etc.

FRANCE

SPARTACUS—*Socialisme et Liberté*: Published every two months by the veteran Rene Lefeuve. Contains challenging articles on the problems of socialism, in addition to book reviews and comments on current affairs. Quite open to the various trends on the libertarian left. **SPARTACUS** also publishes low-priced pamphlets (about 100 titles including reprints of pre-war works). Pamphlets offered at a discount to subscribers. Write to Rene Lefeuve, 5 rue Ste-Croix-de-la-Bretonnerie, Paris-4.

ENGLAND

We need not introduce the group **SOLIDARITY**. They have published many important works besides those we sell. Two pounds (or the equivalent) for a subscription to their bulletin and pamphlet series. **SOLIDARITY** (London), c/o 124 Latham Road, London E. 6.

GREECE

We have received a circular letter from Greek comrades who got together in 1972; they now have a publishing house and bookstore, while participating in various struggles. We don't know much about their positions, except that they claim to be libertarian and anti-authoritarian. Their impressive list of publications reflects a commendable lack of sectarianism: it includes Marx, Bakunin, Debord, Castoriadis, Luxemburg, Bookchin, etc. Bear in mind that after decades of dictatorship these comrades are starting almost from scratch. Write to Christos Konstantinidis, Diethnis Bibliothiki, Delfon 2, Athens.

CHINA

MINUS 8 is published by members and friends of the 70s Biweekly, a libertarian socialist group in Hong Kong. They keep a close watch on Chinese affairs through their contacts on the mainland and with refugees. Subscriptions are 10 U.S. dollars, 180 Lockhart Road, 1st Floor, Wanchai, Hong Kong.

U.S.A.

A group of Sacramento libertarians operates a mail-order bookstore, **CHRYSA LIS BOOKS**, P.O. Box 16943, Sacramento, CA 95816.

SYNTHESIS: "An anti-authoritarian newsletter for citizen-worker self-management ideas and activities" (now working jointly with Philadelphia Solidarity Newsletter). **SYNTHESIS** performs a commendable service in providing a forum for people to express their views on the movement, as well as in furnishing a comprehensive listing of groups and papers. Subscription: \$1.40 for four issues, \$2.80 for eight, **LEAGUE FOR ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY**, P.O. Box 1858, San Pedro, CA 90733.

We regret having to leave many groups out of this list because of limited space. For a fuller list, consult **SYNTHESIS**. □

b o o k s

review

A Woman In Revolt
by Dominique Desanti
Crown Publishers. \$9.95

Crown Publishers have made available in English this long-awaited book on a remarkable woman, Flora Tristan (1803-1844). An illegitimate child, educated but penniless, married, she ran away from a husband who would later persecute her, capture her children, and eventually try to kill her. Although the husband was found guilty, it was Flora's reputation that was tarnished. She fought back against a society that discriminated against her and her sex, adopting the name "the Pariah" when she wrote an account of her short but tumultuous life. In the meantime, she became acquainted with Fourier, Considerant, and other social thinkers. Later she travelled to England, where she met the Chartist and visited working class districts. Written well before the famous book by Engels, the pages she brought back to France, with emphasis on the condition of women, are a poignant description of the abominable situation of the English working class.

After the exploitation of women, Tristan discovered the exploitation of the proletariat and henceforth was to fight against both. She could write at that time that she had everybody against her: the men because she demanded the emancipation of women, and the masters because she demanded the emancipation of the wage-earners.

In 1843 she published a small book, "L'Union Ouvrière." Four months before the arrival of Marx in France, four years before the Communist Manifesto, Flora Tristan told the working men and women that they could rely only on themselves for their emancipation. In this book, she explained that the most miserable male worker is still able to exploit a woman, and that the working men will never be free as long as they impede the liberation of women and refuse to recognize their rights. Tristan met with much hostility: her book was apparently too "utopian" even for the utopian Cabet to be willing

to help her. She was compelled to raise the money for it through small contributions. In the process she established contact with a good number of workers. Exhausted, she died during a propaganda tour in Bordeaux.

If we examine the practical steps proposed by Flora Tristan, we cannot help considering them hopelessly naive. They do not differ much from the schemes advocated by various thinkers before what has been called the "scientific socialism" of Marx. But unlike Fourier, who waited many years for a patron whose money would save humanity, Tristan called on the working class to take its fate into its own hands. Her feminist stand too is as valid now as it was in her time. As Desanti points out, she remained one of the few who neither isolated feminism from the general struggle against class society nor immersed it completely in the proletarian movement.

The biography is also useful to the extent that it sheds light on a period deliberately forgotten by many social historians, for whom the working class movement started only with Marx or Bakunin. Desanti is not merciful toward Marx and Engels for paying scant attention to the Pariah, whose existence they could not have helped being aware of. In fact she does not spare the whole socialist movement: since the classic study by Puech in 1925, barely three or four books have been devoted to Tristan, although some recent writers (M. Rubel, Sheila Rowbotham) have given her due recognition.

The treatment of women in the socialist movement would be worth a separate study; it might expose many subtle and astute devices employed to minimize or obscure their contribution. Desanti makes alive for us a woman with her strengths and weaknesses, whose ideas and experiences still have importance in the present. —C. □

CORRESPONDENCE

[No need to fear that we will publish or circulate the names and addresses of our correspondents. Unless requested to do otherwise, we will print only the writer's initials and city.]

I think the section on *The Revolutionary Organization* comes across as just a bit elitist as it does not stress the role of people in transforming their lives *within* the revolutionary organization. It should place more emphasis on the fact that a revolutionary organization is the creation of the most militant workers and as such is a *real vanguard*, not an organization of people outside of the working class or a privileged body. I consider the FAI-CNT a vanguard, as did many in those organizations, and somewhat of a model

The section on racism is uncommonly good, but I don't think that the section on colonialism goes quite far enough. It should be made clear that while colonial domination has been practically abolished, the status of multinational corporations acting through nationalist regimes has grown. I think that the concept of "client states" needs also to be further explained.

The section on feminism is good, but it does not stress the need for people's personal lives to alter. I think it must be made clear that the means of production, the very processes of producing goods and services, must be changed as much as is possible to accommodate the needs of all and that, in making this change and as a direct result of it, people's lives will change.

There is no strong condemnation of the state as an outmoded vehicle and not enough mention of self-management, but the pamphlet is one of the best I've seen.

—T.P. (Flushing, N.Y.)

"A World to Win"—a very nice pamphlet, if you know what I mean. It is well written, easy to read, nicely laid out, a good size and shape. But, the other side of being "nice," it is bland, unexciting, flat, and impersonal. Form—it is organized as if someone said, "Here are the major issues of the day; how do we stand on them?"

Who was this pamphlet written for? That is very unclear.

... I feel that this is the statement of an organization, a platform, and a bit of a weak one at that. I look between the lines for the people who wrote it, the experiences, the emotions, the desires. I can't find them. *Who* are you? *Why* do you feel the way you do? *What* do you want? *Where* do you see glimmers of it? In what struggles do you see yourselves? In what other theories do you find helpful ideas? The list of names and groups in the introduction is of no use to someone unfamiliar to them. Frankly, I do not feel this is a useful way to begin *communication* with people you do not already know. And the ones you know (like me) will already know what's said in the pamphlet. Is the pamphlet meant as a draw to recruit people? I don't think that's what you intended, but that's what it looks like. That's what every platform looks like.

... I realize the problems you are having. How, indeed, do we develop an anti-vanguard organization? The pamphlet should be up front about this. Hash it out. Ask for help. Share experiences. Be open. When there are questions you disagree on, or aren't sure about—unions, self-management, etc.—say so. Some of us feel this way, some of us that way ... And why. Writing is a form of communication. Communication is a two-way street. Bare yourselves so that others will be open in dealing with you.

—P.R. (Pittsburgh, Pa.)

I don't have time for a long response now—but in several ways I am critical and disappointed in what I consider to be weaknesses in the pamphlet.

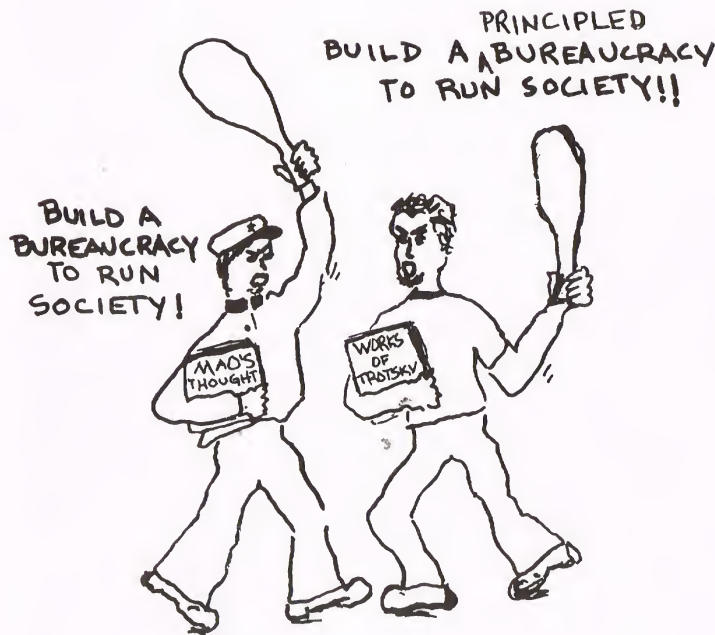
In the preliminary statement it barely mentions workers' councils, and gives no historical examples—except the Kronstadt "Commune" (I guess you made up the word *commune* because at the time it was called a workers' soldiers'

and sailors' council—soviet). The image of the Spanish Revolution is distorted. There were anarchist peasants, syndicalist trade unionists in the cities as well as POUM socialists, Communist peasants and miners, etc. And the peasant revolt was *not* made possible "only by ... anarchist propaganda." The peasants had risen up many times in the past without anarchism.

And there seems to be no real grasp of state

capitalism as the most centralized form of modern capitalism. There seems to be an attitude that Stalinism and bureaucratic state is somewhat different from "contemporary capitalism." All this seems to flow from a large influence of modern American anarchism which regularly distorts working class history and has no real understanding of class society.

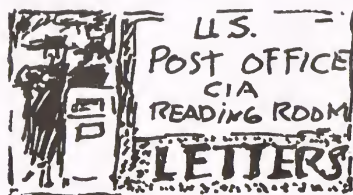
—C.E. (Albuquerque, N.M.)



One of the most striking contradictions of your pamphlet to me was the distinction you make between "workers" and "revolutionaries," especially on page 7. The "revolutionaries" will

"assist" the "workers" etc., seems to smack of the old elitist dichotomy, in spite of your stated intention to "break with outmoded analyses and organizational forms."

—M.A. (Albuquerque, N.M.)



Several of the people working in production (about one-third) had previously worked at Ruckers, another electronics plant. As I pieced together later, there had been a militant union drive there. Elections were held and the union was voted in. The company contested the vote to the NLRB, claiming that the union (IBEW) had used coercion and other disreputable means to gain votes. At that point a considerable majority of the workers went on strike. All of the people who were subsequently hired at Searle had been strikebreakers.*

There were other reasons, which were also elements in our general lack of collective feeling, why a union drive never cropped up. In the first place no one wanted to take the risks involved, since it was apparent that there would not be 100% solidarity. People were afraid that the company would close down completely if threatened in any way. And lastly, we all seemed to operate within a very passive framework. For example, even those people who favored unionization spoke of it as something that someone else would establish for us.

Since lack of union protection made full scale resistance too risky, we had to rely on other, more sporadic means of coping with our worsening situation, from absenteeism to taking cigarette breaks in the bathroom. The old plant (we moved to a new building about four months after I was hired) lent itself to goofing off. The supervisor was isolated in his own cubby hole, there were high shelves to hide behind and a few rooms that were separate from the main assembly line. At opportune moments two or three of us would be able to stop working almost completely and talk or just relax.

There were also instances of spontaneous attempts at collective activity. In fact, one of the most surprising and far-reaching of these attempts was facilitated by the semi-freedom we had in communicating during work time.

About two months prior to the company's move to a new building 20 miles away we began to realize the disadvantages it would mean for us. For some of us it would add up to two hours to the work day in commuting time, not to mention the increased traveling expenses. Suddenly this topic was being heatedly discussed among all of us. We asked for pay raises, a plea summarily dismissed by management. This heightened our anger. What resulted was a short, non-organized, unconscious work stoppage. Most of us spent the better part of one morning standing around complaining to each other and talking about possible actions we could take. I heard one of the few men that worked in pro-

duction blow up at one of the leads, saying that something had better be done to improve working conditions. The little discussion group I was involved in talked over the possibility of a strike (without a union). Someone mentioned that it was one way we could exert pressure on management but that there was always the possibility that scabs would be hired. Another woman (in fact a previous strike-breaker and someone who usually spoke in favor of management) countered with the assertion that we alone were the people who had the knowledge to make the machines. "Shit, all we have to do to stop scabs is burn the blueprints!" she said.

As soon as management got wind of how widespread the discontent was, they announced that there would be an "air-all-complaints" meeting during the afternoon break. At the very mention of the meeting the momentum of our budding collective activity was broken. The emphasis was shifted from group action to individual responsibility, summed up in the statement, "If you don't air your complaints at the meeting then you have no right to gripe." A couple of us put forward a suggestion to hold off meeting with the supervisors until we could meet together and get our own ideas and plans together. There was no real response to this and the proposal wasn't widely circulated.

The meeting, as was expected, worked to the advantage of management. We backed off on all our complaints, and the meeting ended on the note, "we-can-work-out-our-problems-if-we-try."

Our discontent remained, though, directed as much at each other as at the company. Again it was expressed in individual terms. A lot of people felt that they, personally, had been let down by the rest of us, and concluded that it wasn't worth it to stick their necks out for a bunch of slobos who would ultimately chicken out.

What seemed to be a more likely explanation to me was that we were all afraid of the possible consequences. What if they fired us? What if the plant closed down? And we weren't sure of each other. There were real differences between us (e.g. on the unions). We would have to find a way to overcome our fears and mistrust before we could begin to see our common interests and effectively act on them.

Our momentary proto-uprising was positive in that it was a step in that direction. It signaled a break (although it lasted for only an instant) from the atomized way in which we usually handled problems and pointed toward

*The strike eventually failed and months later the company moved its operations to another state.

better relationships between us.

A few weeks later we moved into the new building. It was the fulfillment of management's desire to have total control over our actions. The production area was one huge room with row after row of workbenches. There were no shelves or tall structures that would block the view from the supervisor's glass cubicle. Now I knew what he had meant when he told me, "Things will be different in the new building." It became even clearer two weeks later when I was laid off along with five other workers.

There are many aspects of my experiences at Searle that are not touched upon in this article. It has not been my intention to paint a one-sidedly pessimistic picture, but for me, the most

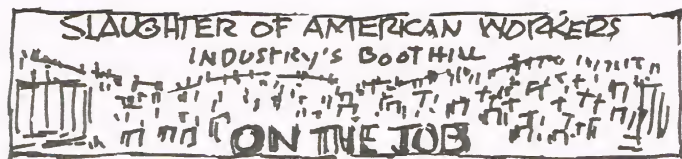
salient feature of work is that it is a conflictual situation for everyone involved. How a group of workers handles this conflict in many ways influences the more general fabric of life in a factory.

At Searle, a small workshop, there were many obstacles to our self-activity: e.g. fear of victimization by management; fear of a runaway shop. These obstacles and frustrations crept into our personal relationships, creating further obstacles. But it is only through collective activity (and we got a glimpse of it at Searle) that a worsening work situation can be dealt with. Hopefully, as working conditions continue on their downhill trend at Searle, the workers there will again begin to act along these lines. —S.K. □



Weekly People, September 4, 1915

HOW MUCH ON THE HOOF?



EXPERIENCES IN A SMALL FACTORY

I recently spent a few months working in a small light manufacturing plant as a mechanical assembler. When I was hired I greeted my new occupation with an ambiguous anxiety. In a way I was eager to start the job, both because I was desperate for money and, having never worked in a factory before, I was curious. At the same time I dreaded the prospect of spending 40 hours of every week as a subordinate doing a repetitive, boring and ultimately deadening job.

As it turned out, all of my fears were realized. Naturally I hated being a worker. On the other hand, all my hopes for collective confrontations with the bosses were necessarily changed into a more practical assessment of my workplace. It became more realistic for me to try to understand why there wasn't a more collective feeling among us and why our attempts to confront our situation were isolated and stunted. This article is an attempt to develop such an understanding.

The company was engaged in making artificial respirators and related machinery. This field is relatively new and the company (a subsidiary of Searle Pharmaceuticals, a multi-national corporation) had been operating for only two years. What was disturbing to the higher-ups was the failure of the company to make a profit during the first year of operation. This resulted in a restructuring of management and production techniques. The process had been set in motion about six months before I was hired and included the merger of the company with another subsidiary (with ensuing rumors that the plant would move to Texas); the purge of most of lower management personnel and their replacement with people trained in the methods of scientific management; and the further Taylorization of the work process.

These various machinations in the halls of management meant a deterioration of working conditions, through harassment, speed-up, increase in the work load, and further division of

labor. A general atmosphere of worry, tension, and demoralization was created as a result.

I was introduced to my co-workers in this setting. My first impression was that the people I worked with had a healthy attitude toward work. There were the usual complaints about working, the supervisors, wages, and unsafe conditions. In addition to the desire to be away from the drudgery of work completely, there was a general feeling that it was pointless and self-defeating to work hard. No matter how hard or fast one worked, management would always want a little (or a lot) more. At the same time we were concerned with the quality of our work, especially since we were making life-saving machines. This desire was frustrated by almost every aspect of the work process: production quotas, division of labor, the boring nature of the work.

But we couldn't always find a way to translate these commonly held attitudes and feelings into collective action against the assaults on our working conditions. There were several reasons for this, one being the demoralized and tense atmosphere in the plant. It was both a cause and an effect of our inability to defend ourselves collectively. Since there was no real feeling of unity we all tried to handle our problems with management individually. The resultant frustration was reflected in our relationships with each other. There was more than the usual number of sarcastic attacks on each others' personalities, physical characteristics and abilities. And we would often spend our breaks in awkward silence, looking at the clock, a kind of testimonial that leisure time is the mere shadow of our unfree labor.

There was also a problem concerning unions. It has been my experience, and that of others I've talked to, that when workers begin to think of collective ways of defending themselves it usually points toward unionization. While I was there we never reached the point of seriously considering it. Had we, though, serious divisions among us would have undoubtedly arisen.

Continued on Page 10